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SUBJECT: CHURCH ADVOCACY RESULTS IN ACTION BY RELUCTANT POLICE AFTER  
FIVE NUNS ARE ASSAULTED IN INDORE

¶1. Summary: On October 25, 15 to 20 members of a right-wing Hindu group allegedly assaulted and injured five nuns of the Franciscan Clarist order near Indore, Madhya Pradesh. Christian sources told us that the Indore police were initially reluctant to register a complaint against the Hindu attackers, but responded to advocacy by the Catholic Church and other Christian groups. At the same time, the police also registered a counter complaint by the Hindu group against the nuns for "attempts to convert by inducement." The incident is further evidence of the misuse of existing anti-conversion laws in some Indian states by right-wing Hindu groups to intimidate the small Christian minority. However, this minority is now using protest and politics to counter this trend. End Summary.

Hindu Extremists Assault Catholic Nuns

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¶2. According to Father Anand Muttungal, Public Relations Officer (PRO) of the Madhya Pradesh (MP) Catholic Church, on October 25, 15 to 20 members of Hindu Dharma Raksha Samiti (DRS - Hindu Religion Defense Committee) assaulted five nuns of the Franciscan Clarist order, all of whom were Indian citizens, near Indore, in Madhya Pradesh. Reportedly, DRS activists dragged the nuns to the nearby police chowky (a sub-station), beating them en route. The assailants also damaged the nuns' vehicle. One of the nuns fractured her leg while another suffered head injuries.

¶3. Press reports indicated that the DRS members claimed that the nuns had been using "inducements" to convert people in the community. The attackers confiscated a Bible and some pamphlets from the nuns and handed it to the police as evidence that the nuns were trying to attract converts. Sister Jincy, one of the nuns, denied the allegation. According to a faith-based website, she said: "We had gone to attend the Rosary Prayer at Mr. Anil's house. Mr. Anil is a Catholic by birth and the driver of our convent." The same website also quoted Dharma Raksha Samiti official Kamal Waghela, who said: "Sisters have done conversion in the locality, and they have allured people to accept Christian faith. The people who came to meet sisters after the prayer picked up a quarrel on this issue which led to

a clash between the sisters and our workers."

#### Police Ensure Nuns' Safety, But Are Slow to Take Legal Action

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¶4. Reportedly, the small police outpost, worried about the nuns' safety, quickly moved them to a bigger police station nearer the city of Indore. "The Christian community should be thankful to us for saving the lives of the nuns because the mob had dangerous elements," Banganga Station in-charge T S Baghel told The Indian Express on October 26.

¶5. However, according to Father Anand Muttungal, Public Relations Officer (PRO) of the Madhya Pradesh (MP) Catholic Church, the Indore police initially refused to register a complaint (known as "FIR" -- First Information Report) against the Hindu attackers. Only after Muttungal approached the MP state police chief, could the complaint be registered, on October 27. Simultaneously, the police also registered a counter-complaint by the Hindu attackers against the nuns for "offering inducements to convert".

¶6. Muttungal criticized the police's response, noting that the

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police only briefly arrested the attackers on October 30, and immediately released them on bail. According to Muttungal, the police diluted the charges against the attackers in the FIR by a) delaying the nuns' medical examination by a government doctor (by which time the minor injuries healed), and b) down-playing the leg injury of one of the nuns in the doctor's report. (Note: Church sources say that she will not be able to work for at least a month because of a multiple fracture. End note.)

#### Christians Strategize Well To Get Heard

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¶7. To overcome the police resistance to register the nuns' complaint, MP Christians used a two-pronged approach, Muttungal explained. At the same time that Muttungal approached the state police chief, Indore organizations informed the police that they would be marching in protest on October 27. (Note: Indore was hosting a global investors' meet on October 26 and 27, organized by the Madhya Pradesh Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government. Indore police did not want to risk the embarrassment of a demonstration during the meet. End Note.) Indore police registered the complaint and requested Christians to defer their protest march.

¶8. Accordingly, Indore Christians marched in protest on October 28 and Christian organizations in Bhopal held a candle-light rally on November 2, a week after the incident. The same day, Christian organizations met with the Madhya Pradesh Governor and apprised him of their concerns. Moreover, Church leaders in MP have asked that Christians all over the country send letters to BJP President Rajnath Singh urging him to prevent his party's government in Madhya Pradesh from harassing minorities. Muttungal also told us that national Christian organizations

will request women parliamentarians to raise the Indore incident as a gender issue in the November session of the Indian parliament.

Comment

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¶9. The state of Madhya Pradesh's anti-conversion law dates back to the 1960s. According to this law, it is illegal to offer "inducements" to attract converts. Madhya Pradesh Christian organizations allege that under the current BJP chief minister Shiv Raj Singh Chauhan (who assumed office in November 2005) right-wing Hindu groups have systematically misused the law to harass Christian workers. Right-wing Hindu groups accuse Catholic Church workers and Protestant evangelicals of offering inducements for conversion, and register a complaint against Christians under this law. In addition, these Hindu groups have begun to use force and intimidation to discourage this perceived practice. In many cases, leaders in BJP-led states have encouraged the police to register these complaints with alacrity, and to dilute -- or not register -- the complaint against the perpetrators. Muttungal estimated that from November 2005 until today, there have been nearly 100 incidents in which Christians have been harassed or assaulted. (Note: In recent trip to neighboring Chhattisgarh, a Hindu group representative told Congenoff that he was fighting conversion through "trickery" and protecting Hindu culture, and denied reports of assaults on Christians. Meanwhile, Christian groups admitted that in isolated cases, some preachers have used inducements to attract converts. End Note.)

¶10. The International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 and 2007 catalogues incidents where anti-conversion laws have been misused by Hindu groups seeking to "protect" Hindu culture and prevent conversions in some Indian states. The incident in

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Indore demonstrates two unfortunate trends. First, the absence of a firm police and administration response has emboldened right-wing Hindu groups to continue their attacks against Christians. Second, Christian groups have begun to assert themselves against this trend by using political action and protest to ensure that some justice is served. End Comment.

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